

*“Who we are is inseparable from where we are.” Kent C. Ryden*

## **Berkeley, California: A Primer to Documentation and Analysis of Urban Vernacular Architecture**

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Thank you to the American Folklore Society for supporting this professional development opportunity. I traveled to and from Berkeley, California (from Reno, Nevada), to study urban vernacular architecture and learn about common, local house styles and how these contribute to and reflect a shared sense of place, identity, and meaning. This project focuses on a small city (what most now call an “urban village”) setting rather than on the built environment in a rural landscape, which is the more common in vernacular architecture surveys.



The purpose of this project is to document homes in a neighborhood of Berkeley, the Elmwood District, through photography, sketches, oral histories, and informal interviews. That material, combined with research from primary and secondary sources, connected the places and the people who live there. Unlike the majority of vernacular architecture publications and teachings, my approach does not include measured drawings, dating techniques, or construction and materials technology. I would encourage the use of those whenever they benefit the description and interpretation of architecture. I use a historical perspective and ethnographic methods to identify the social and cultural construction of meanings for this specific place.



**Components of report:** This report has three components. It is a primer for others in folklore intending to study vernacular architecture in urban environments. Because every community and every corresponding group of architectural styles are different, this framework for analysis, though based on the study of homes and businesses on

a distinct neighborhood [or district] in Berkeley, California, may be generalized and adapted to nearly any other area of the country.

The report also reflects specifics about the Berkeley neighborhood called the Elmwood District. Using the Elmwood District as a model for the discussion of urban vernacular architecture and sense of place, this neighborhood provides examples of buildings--mostly house styles—and the insights about people, place, and meaning that can be garnered by using material culture as a centerpiece.

The third element of this report is the photographs. These can be cut and pasted into a power point or comparable document. Notes that relate to the photos are subsumed in the report narrative as the ‘specifics about the Elmwood District’. The photos and descriptive and interpretive notes may be excerpted for classes, workshops, or other purposes.

Text that appears in bold face indicates strategic components of this primer.

**Brief history of Berkeley and its buildings:** Beginning in the 1860s, Berkeley, California developed as an intellectual center and a place where its broadly defined middle-class residents became anchored to the community through its public buildings, homes and gardens. The University of California, Berkeley, first called The College of California and housed in Oakland, was populated by residents who were attracted to the mild climate, eye-catching natural surroundings, and a community centered around a college campus.



Many residents moved from Oakland to Berkeley along with the campus at a time when Brown Shingle, Victorian, and Colonial Revival houses were common. After the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, both Berkeley and

Oakland became a refuge for those who had to flee the city, and the area expanded with numerous Arts and Crafts structures and vernacular (local, common) adaptations became popular.

**Berkeley architectural traditions:** Named the “The Greater San Francisco Bay Area First, Second, and Third Traditions,” the most common styles of architecture in Berkeley and the Greater Bay Area were those built by architects and non-professionals who also designed neighborhoods with vernacular adaptations of established house styles (already mentioned) against the backdrop of curved roads, lush (former) farmland, steep hillsides, redwood groves, and fog, which to this day thread together communities into urban walkways. These contribute to a particular and shared sense of place and identity, connectedness, and meaning for Berkeley locals.











As in most of the other parts of Berkeley, each house in the Elmwood is unique, and different from the others on either side and across the street. There are few areas in the entire city of approximately 118,000 people (with about 35, 000 students) that could be described as having houses that are uniform tract homes, part of a “subdivision,” or a “gated community”.

Because of the differences juxtaposed in color, style, gardens, and fences of each house, block, section and neighborhood of the Elmwood District, walking or driving along a street in the area evokes images of strong individualism. At the same time, because of the seamless interspersion of single- and multiple-story, large and small homes, and an emphasis on similar building materials and general period design, each block creates an impression that the inhabitants are basically equals in status, wealth, and prestige. Egalitarianism and individualism are the dominant perceptions of the Elmwood District. And in fact, egalitarianism and individualism are two of the major hallmarks in the public imagination of all of Berkeley.

Ironically, nearly all of Berkeley's neighborhoods are currently (2016) in a housing crisis. The need for affordable housing is at a breaking point. The older houses that project images of equality and individualism have become so coveted that the middle class can no longer afford to buy them. The population has increased dramatically (due to technology companies in the Bay Area) that modern mid-rise apartment buildings are being built quickly and efficiently, but they are displacing generations of single-family and low income residents.

**Encouraging folklorists to focus on vernacular architecture:** A folklorist can tap into images and symbols, interpretations and meanings, a sense of place and identity, and social conflicts (especially housing) by integrating documentation and analysis of the local architecture of an urban area. By combining the steps of documentation with talking to residents and conducting oral history interviews, the folklorist and the local and scholarly communities benefit.

Communities are missing a folklorist's perspectives, education, and training when doing the work of recording vernacular or urban-vernacular architecture. Historic preservation, land-use planning and landmarks associations throughout the country are active in documenting the history of the land and its built environment, and utilizing these as a draw in heritage and cultural tourism as a social and economic development tool. Folklore analyses contribute rich documentation and interpretations of urban-vernacular architecture and sense of place, and frequently reach beyond the goals of historic preservationists and architectural historians.

In addition to publications in the *Vernacular Architecture Forum*, an April, 2016 conference in New York titled, "Crisis of Place: Preserving Folk and Vernacular Architecture in New York," also addressed questions about "what is folk and vernacular architecture?" and "who is sustaining vernacular design and construction in the face of globalization and gentrification, and why?" These are among the questions facing folklorists who are and need to be revitalizing studies of material culture and vernacular architecture.

As folklorists we talk about context and contextualization often. It is the thread that runs through our studies and analyses. Vernacular architecture studies are most productive when the structure (building) is seen through the lens of the cultural landscape, or larger context. This means, for example, a single house is best understood when it is juxtaposed and compared to others in the same geographical area, and analyzed with respect to the local and

regional social constructions of gender, race and ethnicity, social and economic class. Further, modern urban-vernacular architecture studies encompass a sense of place, community, and ways in which the community members identify with their surroundings; with their city.

### **Steps of Documentation – A Primer**

**Define** the space you plan to examine. Whether you already have a particular home, building, neighborhood, district, or other designated area of study, or are trying to pinpoint one, conduct **preliminary surveys**. As Thomas Carter states in *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture*, “know before you go.” (p 20).

With recent road maps in hand, drive roads and freeways to get different views from north, south, east, and west. Obtain an aerial or other distance view of the study neighborhood and its surroundings if possible. **Maps** reflecting the history of the place you choose to document are pivotal to your understanding. Topographic, USGS (United States Geological Society), and Sanborn maps provide a view into the past of buildings and properties. Local public libraries, nearby college knowledge centers, and historical societies are often reliable sources for these types of maps.

Wherever you can walk or ride a bike will allow for a higher quality of **photographs**, contact with residents, and a better position for detailed observation of windows, doors, overhangs, building materials, distinctions, and quirks. Balance the distance view of the buildings, obtained by the freeway and road, with the intimate exterior and interior descriptions, photos, and sketches of the space.





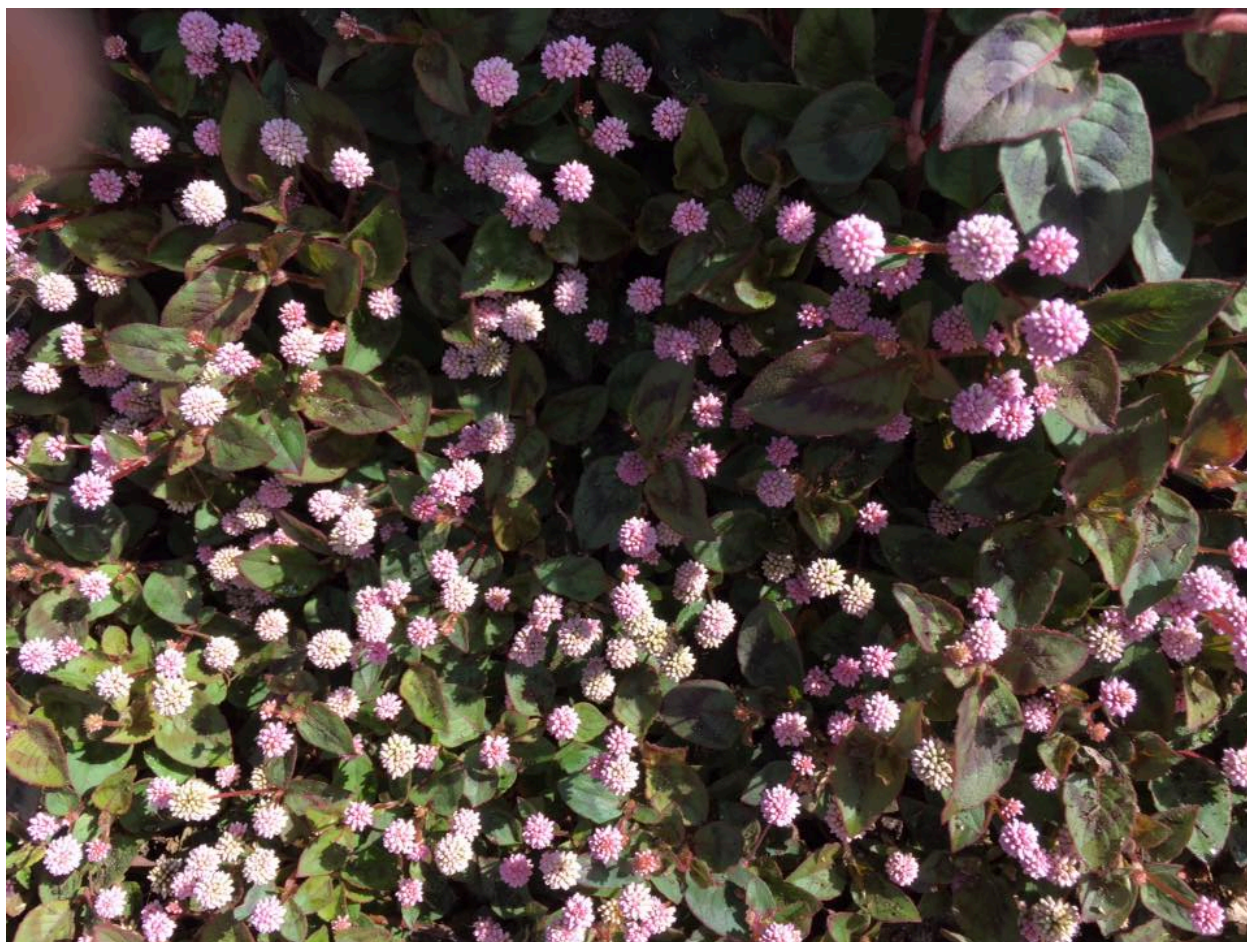






Nearly every home in the Elmwood District has a front **yard** or planned flower or vegetable **garden**, companion animals are roaming everywhere, there is a feeling of smallness, or intimacy, and oldness, the smell of dampness, and enormous diversity in style and attention to architectural detail through material and design. From an aerial view, or a view from the hills behind the campus, the most obvious architectural styles are square, mid-modern structures. Both are important types of common architecture in Berkeley, but viewing neighborhoods, the university, and downtown from different **vantage points** leads to a more honest evaluation of the most 'typical' structures and their role in the community.







Using near and distant observations, thus determining “typical” styles and typologies of houses, and comparing these with historical sources and the **mapping of a survey site** (such as the Sanborn map of Berkeley’s Elmwood



neighborhoods) divulges **patterns of behavior** in building materials and design, land use, and proximity to commercial, food and retail stores, and transportation sources. All of these are keys in the search for peoples' values and principles, and how they are expressed in material culture.

The **boundaries** I drew for my documentation and research in the Elmwood District went from the College Avenue sign that says, "Welcome to Berkeley on one side, and "Welcome to Oakland," on the other, and stretches block by block to the University of California, Berkeley campus, on the south side. Throughout my documentation, the borders of my study area changed.

Research at the Berkeley Historical Society and discussion with residents defined, redefined, and continued to redefine the north, south, east, west edges of the Elmwood. The borders of the district changed over time, and sometimes per person. A study of **place names** of streets, stores, and areas was enlightening, as well as frustrating, but it is an essential part of defining space, and unraveling historic maps.

Attending meetings and/or becoming a member of the local **historical society, architectural society, landmarks associations** and **heritage center** establish personal connections and can open doors to the use of archival and other collections. These agencies often house the best examples of **historical photographs, historical postcards, and oral histories**. They, along with **census records**, and **deeds** from the county courthouse are a means of tracking property changes that have been recorded and encapsulating the history of an area. Each city has its own name for agencies that preserve historical records and are active in the community. I am a member of the Berkeley Historical Society, Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association, and the Berkeley Landmarks Association. My participation has helped me make contacts, develop relationships in order to conduct oral histories, and made me an honorary member of the community, Berkeley, though I do not live within the city limits.

The same agencies and organizations, in addition to the University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft Library and Oral History Center, and the School of Environmental Design **produced transcribed oral history interviews, letters, records, images, diaries, and narratives** about **social class, gender, ethnicity and race** as they pertain to homes, ownership of shops and stores, issues of housing, commuting and transportation, churches and other religious structures, and campuses for K-12 grades and colleges.



Most urban historical and architectural organizations lead **organized tours** of gardens, paths and walkways, “heritage homes,” and historic buildings. Participating in these is another way to engage with the community and to quickly learn about the architecture and what people value in the architecture. Berkeley has many of these tours. It was on one of the tours that I learned the importance of retaining original locks and keys of the inside doors (not the front or back doors) of Brown Shingle and Arts and Crafts homes. These ‘lock and key’ originals are a selling point to buyers in the Bay Area, so photographs of them are included in the marketing materials and website photo tours. Why are they significant? As per oral history interviews, because they illustrate the internal integrity of historic design and the types and quality of materials used in the Arts and Crafts homes, and literally and symbolically ‘keep a person safe and secure from outsiders’. Replacing the locks and other historic material culture in the houses with modern fixtures would demonstrate an ignorance of the value of these homes.

If there is a **folklorist or cultural anthropologist** in the community with which you are working, make and keep contact with her/him. She/he can be a central figure in making connections with others working with architecture, preservations, realtors, and real estate agencies.

Talking to **real estate agents**, particularly those who specialize in historic properties is invaluable. The agents and all major realty websites advertise “**open houses**” for homes for sale. Generally, with a request to the agent before touring the house, they will allow photographs of the interiors and exteriors, and allow making quick sketches and measurements. Going to real estate ‘open houses’ is an expedient way to see different styles, building materials, designs, layouts, and uniqueness or commonality of homes in an area. Take advantage of these opportunities since they are free, open to the public, and again, can lead to revelations about the structures and the people who live in them.

Most photographs, maps, and other information on websites that market homes for sale are public domain; however, requesting permission for use is the proper procedure. **Home-for-sale website photos** are a means of obtaining clear, excellent images of homes and other structures that are nearly impossible for the layperson

photographer. However, black-and-white photography frequently used in vernacular architecture study and by architectural historians continues to be an ideal way to capture details and light.

When you take your own photographs or make rough drawings of the outside and inside of houses and other buildings and structures, **document the context** surrounding them. Include the streets, mailboxes, yards, ironwork, fences, gates, lighting fixtures, symbols and signs. The contextual images bring the community to life.

















Talk to shop owners and to residents of the community who do not have training and education relevant to urban vernacular architecture. Inquire about **multi-generational ownership of homes and stores**. Ask these people about their impressions of the local architecture and its importance in the neighborhood, community and city. In the Elmwood area (and others) of Berkeley, residents educated me about the pride of renting or owning a home made of redwood (a **local building material**), and the uniqueness of the homes because residents took care to preserve leaded glass windows, stained glass panes, original front doors, parquet floors, staircase banisters, and porches. This was the case with small, relatively inexpensive homes and with old grocery stores, as well as with large, expensive homes and commercial enterprises.

**Churches and other religious structures, parks**, stands of trees, termination and direction of **roadways**, access to green spaces, and trespassing rules are all grist for the mill. Had it not been for my oral history interviews, and one I read from the 1970s, I would not have realized that Julia Morgan and Bernard Maybeck, world-renowned architects from the Bay Area, designed Berkeley churches without crosses, and homes for low income families near



public transportation, so that religion and class structure would be absorbed into the Berkeley community, and not be obvious. These important elements speak to the values of the community.







When embarking on an urban vernacular architecture study, consider the planning and use, artistry and style, infrastructure, social class, gender, and ethnicity of the population. Take stock of homes that may be inherited and passed down through generations and those that attract tenants and owners new to the area. Use these to create a framework for analysis. Also importantly, find out if the area of study has a name, such as the “Elmwood District.” Once a place is named, it acquires an identity. Use these along with oral history and casual interviews, photography, maps, sketches, and research to interpret the buildings within the larger cultural landscape. The ties between place and people are strong. Homes and other buildings express beliefs and values and are a source of identity with a community.

## Reference

Carter, Thomas, and Cromley, Elizabeth Collins. *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture: A Guide to the Study of Ordinary Buildings and Landscapes*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005.